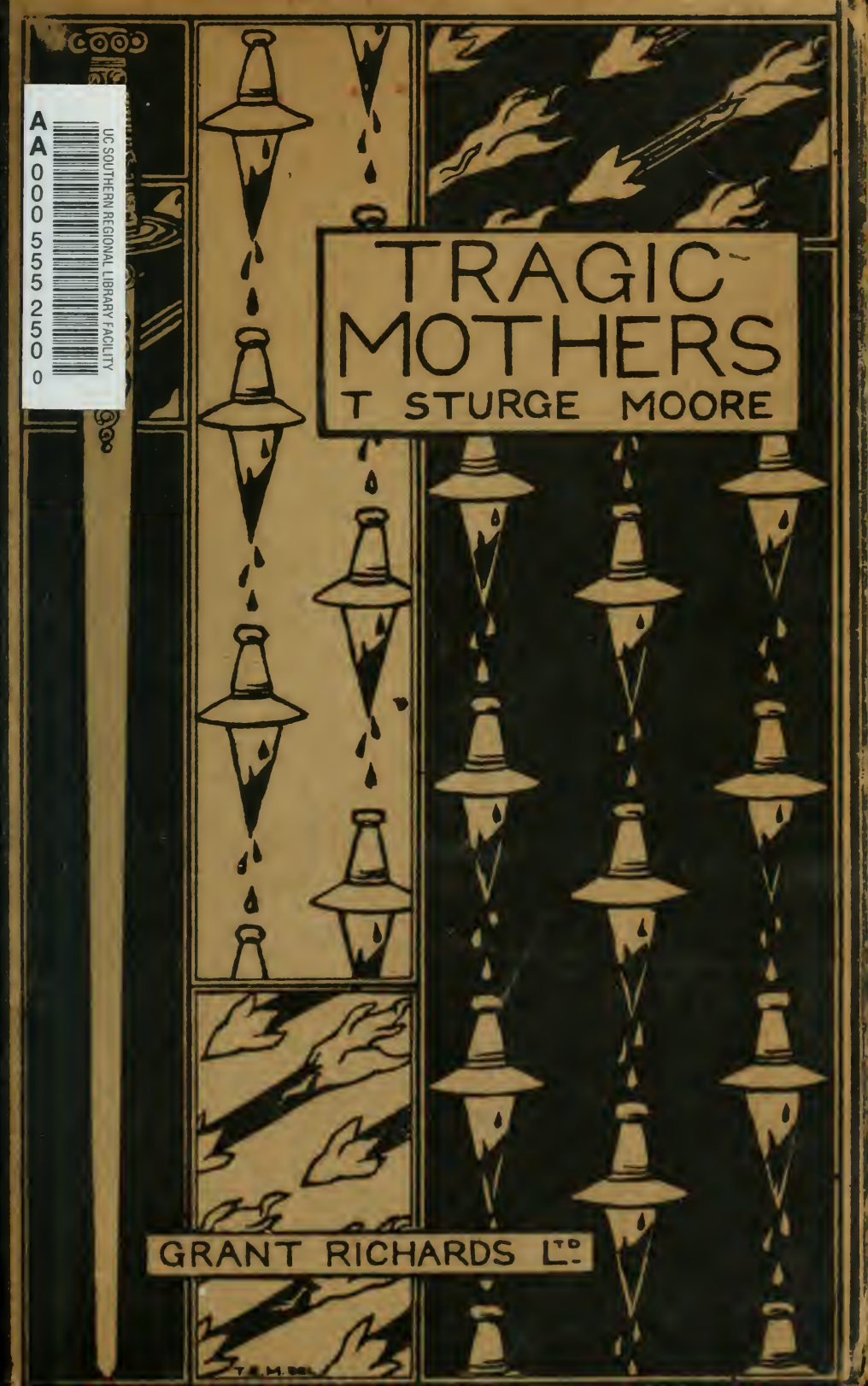


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# TRAGIC MOTHERS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY

1899. THE VINEDRESSER AND OTHER POEMS
1901. APHRODITE AGAINST ARTEMIS
1903. ABSALOM
1903. DANAË
1905. THE LITTLE SCHOOL
1906. POEMS
1911. MARIAMNE
1911. A SICILIAN IDYLL
1914. THE SEA IS KIND
1917. THE LITTLE SCHOOL (ENLARGED)
1920. DANAË

PROSE

1899. THE CENTAUR AND THE BACCHANT, FROM THE FRENCH BY MAURICE DE GUERIN
1920. THE POWERS OF THE AIR

CRITICISM

1900. ALTDORFER
1904. DURER
1906. CORREGGIO
1910. ART AND LIFE (FLAUBERT AND BLAKE)
1915. HARK TO THESE THREE
1919. SOME SOLDIER POETS

# TRAGIC MOTHERS

BY

T. STURGE MOORE

GRANT RICHARDS LTD
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# MEDEA

TO

BERYL DE ZOETE

## THE CHARACTERS

THE CURTAIN BEARER MALE
TWO CURTAIN FOLDERS FEMALE
PROTO A NYMPH PUT BY ARTEMIS IN CHARGE OF MEDEA
MEDEA WIFE OF JASON KING OF ATHENS
MERMEROS SON OF MEDEA
PHERES SON OF MEDEA

## NOTE

My friend Mr. W. B. Yeats asked me to try my hand, having himself achieved brilliant success, in this new form of drama, independent of stage and scenery and suitable for chamber presentation. The idea had come to him while reading about the Japanese Noh plays.

[Enter one bearing a folded curtain. He bows to the assembly and then addresses them:]
You doubt of ghost and angel god and jinn,
You think those bodied like you, the sole speakers
Who put a show of wisdom into words
Here on this planet piebald with pale seas.
But those less hood-winked with to-day, still hear
Voices in chancelled wood and panelled room;
Since thought can run too long on such smooth rails,
I ask your minds to shake off their stale faith
That things are always merely what they seem.
Let me transport you back to ancient Greece
Where the most-travelled and smart-witted knave
Trembled accompanied by an invisible crowd
That could at will appal his ear or eye:—
Some neutral daimons like myself, and some
Malignant ghouls, but some exquisite beings
God, goddess or tree-cloister's naked nun,
Dryad with doe-like glance and furtive step.
Yes, then the man whose wink steadied the market,
Had not one doubt that though the body rot
Helpless in earth, yet might its wraith be met
On soundless phantom feet abroad by night
To thwart or prosper those with clay-clogged shoes.
[Turning and beckoning to two females who have entered]
Come hither sisters, help me fold Time's woof
From off an acre of the Arcadian field,
Till what occurred three thousand years ago
Be watched again to-night by these choice friends
Whose kindly leisured looks invite our art.
[He stands in the centre in front, and while they come to either side and begin to unfold the curtain from him, he says:]
CURTAIN BEARER
Pain dwells with life,
Joy's limping and wry-necked shadow;
So the old live with the young,
Courage has pain for wife,
And he dies a fool with these words on his tongue:

" In an instant I shall have done with pain,
And never wish to be dead again."
[Then while they refold the curtain, he says :]
" Yea, thou art still,"
Cries the phantom shaken with fever,
" Cold flesh needs never to ease an ache
But I, I walk and am ill.
O for a sleep too sound to wake,
That a soul might really have done with pain,
Who had swallowed their nostrum death in vain."
[As the curtain was refolded, a gold rock has been discovered on the floor. THE BEARER now takes the folded curtain and squats some way behind this rock. THE FOLDERS remain in front but turn to rejoin him, saying :]

FIRST FOLDER
Look up through the leaves,
The moon rides high ;
This silence seems to wait
For music, it even deceives
The ear with the far-off cry
Of a chase,—nay, can dilate
The picturing eye with nymphs that run
Short-kilted after the stag.

SECOND FOLDER
Hush ! our office here is done.

FIRST FOLDER
Fear not, I will not lag
Though this tree-pillared place
Be carpeted with moon-light lace.
[They sit down on either side of the BEARER.]

FIRST FOLDER
Mortal footsteps, hark !

CURTAIN BEARER
Among them
Fall those that bear a laden heart.

FIRST FOLDER
Whose are they ?

SECOND FOLDER
I guess, for I already feel

A childish soul seek control of my powers.
[Wimples her head in grey lawn.]
FIRST FOLDER
When next she speaks the voice will be another's.
Can you tell whose ?
CURTAIN BEARER
When have I led you blindly ?
Medea comes seeking her murdered boys.
One little fellow gains by our friend's trance
And soon the younger will be served by yours.
FIRST FOLDER
Why did she murder them ?
CURTAIN BEARER
Jason, her husband,
Tired of her, at Corinth, jurists held
The rites by which he wed her in far Colchis
Were nought but wizardry, and ruled him free
To espouse the daughter of their king . . .
But there ! I waste my breath, your head is clouded.
[The SECOND FOLDER has wimpled her head in grey lawn.]
We had been over-heard but that they stir
The boughs so, brushing through the thicket hither.
Yet had we been, they must have deemed shrubs talked ;
For we are junipers to mortal eyes.
[Enter PROTO, a nymph carrying a light hunting javelin, followed by MEDEA with bow and quiver slung over her shoulder.]
PROTO
Listen, I think I heard them.
MEDEA [as to herself and wringing her locked hands]
Oh, I hear them !
PROTO
This wide-backed billow of the forest floor
Cuts off sound from beyond it ;
They may be nearer us than one would think.
MEDEA [as before]
Nearer than one would think.
PROTO
The rise is trifling and so sparsely treed,

We may cross at a run to the further slope and never
Fetch a short breath before we hear them clearly,
Nay, very likely, see.
MEDEA [as before]
Hear them clearly, nay, very likely, see.
PROTO
You bandy me my words, you sullen echo.
First, you fell out on purpose, now refuse
To make an effort to rejoin the hunt :
You crane your ear where nothing's to be heard,
Though from yon vantage ground we might . . .
MEDEA [interrupting]
I hear !
PROTO
What do you hear ?
MEDEA
That which I listen for.
Leave me.
PROTO
The Goddess charged me not to leave you.
Else I'd not loiter here, but should now plunge
One of the foremost through the tallest bracken
Or leap the fallen poles in some new clearing.
MEDEA [who had been listening to something else]
Did you not hear that ? then ?
PROTO
Not the least sound.
MEDEA
I'm sure I heard my children shout at play,
Not far from here.
PROTO
I thought that they were dead ?
MEDEA
Yes, yes, they are. May not dead children play ?
PROTO
Was it a fever took them ?
MEDEA
Never you mind !
Be silent, let me listen.
[A pause.]

PROTO
I do assure you there was no outward sound ;
A fancy born of sorrow has deceived you.
MEDEA
More likely they are shy while you are here :
Come, take a run up yonder as you meant to,
Glance down the glades, hearken for the halloo
And then come back. I will wait here alone.
PROTO
You think, their phantoms may be here to-night ?
MEDEA
Yes, they must long for me as I for them :
Alive they were shy of strangers ; you daunt them, you
Must quit me and they'll scamper to my arms.
PROTO
I dare not do it ; I . . .
MEDEA [interrupting]
What do you fear ?
The forest, or the night, or loneliness ?
PROTO [hesitatingly]
You know that the . . .
MEDEA
Always afraid ! of caves,
Of hollow trees ; your shadow must not fall
Towards them as you pass ! Mere words there are
That you turn white at . . .
PROTO
But the goddess . . .
MEDEA
Yes.
Orthia, she drinks blood. Hecate—there
You blench !—Those names are hers as much
As Cynthia is, which trees on summer nights
Will whisper audibly in adoration ;
For she it was ordained their tall green growth.
PROTO
We must obey her least command ; but you . . .
MEDEA [interrupting]
My girlhood studied
Manifold Delia under every aspect,

Not merely as the huntress Artemis
Or as Selene guiding her bright moon.
PROTO
Yet you betrayed your virgin vow and so . . .
MEDEA [interrupting]
Hark, there they are again !
PROTO
That proves you dream it
For I was listening.
MEDEA
Ears can listen, yes ;
But the heart hears. I need to speak with them—
I ache for their forgiveness. There was no time . . .
How could I tell them ? . . . Oh, their dying eyes
Reproached me—thought their mother was not kind !
PROTO
I pity your distress but how can I . . .
MEDEA [interrupting]
You must—if blood has any natural leap
Or sudden power in you.
PROTO
You but dream,—
If I could hear what you pretend to . . .
MEDEA [interrupting]
" Pretend ! "
Is your mind frozen ? " Pretend ! " You lump of ice,
You shall !
PROTO
What ! disobey our Sovran Lady ?
MEDEA
Pretend that you were driven off with blows ;
The bruise to excuse you need not be a bad one.
Lend me your spear, the butt of the shaft will serve.
[PROTO yields her javelin but at the same time instinctively increases her distance.]
MEDEA [reproachfully]
When a bough intercepts your hot career,
You take pride not to moan.
[Turns away with resentment.]
I would not hurt you half as much as a fall.

PROTO
What do those fierce eyes think they see in me ?
MEDEA
A live doll nigh as friendly as a stone.
PROTO
I never have refused to talk with you.
MEDEA
Words answer words ; what answers the hurt mind,
And deep-panged heart ? have you felt nothing ? never ?
[Suddenly starting as though hearing something.]
Ah ! there again, quite near !
FIRST FOLDER [without moving, in a childish voice]
Talking, always talking.
SECOND FOLDER [without moving, in a childish voice]
She's busy still.
MEDEA
You heard ?
PROTO
I don't think so.
MEDEA
You did !
PROTO
You're mad ;
And oh ! I doubt my senses, doubting yours.
MEDEA
Come, come, one good blue bruise upon that shoulder !
[She strikes at PROTO who avoids the blow]
Coward ! [Stamps with vexation.]
Let me then, with this arrow,
Ever so slightly notch your dullard ear ;
'Twill drip and stain your shift, whence you adduce
Complete defence, saying I shot at you.
PROTO
What a perverse ruling was that which made you
Fellow of our chaste college, after years
On earth, a man-used thing, that has lived stived
In wicked places !
MEDEA
Ha, if you but dreamed
What these two hands have done !

PROTO

Done ! what ?

MEDEA

Were *you*

To hear, horror would spring upon your back
And ride as a lynx on a doe's neck rides, then
I'd listen to your panic crashing far
Through the still woods. Come, lend an ear !

PROTO [clapping her hands over her ears]

No, no !

MEDEA

For me your flight will mean unspeakable solace
[Coming close and catching PROTO'S hand away from one ear]
I killed my children.
[Freeing PROTO'S hand]

Run !

[Again advancing]

Two little boys.

[With a gesture of impatience]
Be off ! Are you too weak-kneed ? How can I
Give you the strength to be the sheep you are ?

PROTO [hoarsely]

Did you not love them ?

MEDEA

My children ?

PROTO

Yes.

MEDEA

What can your listless bowels know of love ?
Hunger for their forgiveness gnaws at mine.
How could I tell them ere they felt the steel ?
Expected—the blow had been far, far more cruel !—
Cannot those eyes acquit me. When my knife
Had sacrificed my darlings to Orthia
She pardoned me that mutiny, my marriage,
In dragon-coursered car made apparition,
And brought my penitence home—home to this forest.

PROTO

I know the goddess has forgiven you, but . . .

MEDEA
Is it *you* cannot forgive !
FIRST FOLDER [as before]
Send her to sleep, mother.
MEDEA [as though someone had whispered in her ear]
I will, I will.
PROTO [in awe]
Lunacy doubles her voice to call and answer !
What is her sick will now ?
(MEDEA, turning on PROTO, advances waving the javelin like a magician's wand.]
PROTO [in terror, as she runs in on MEDEA and seizing both her hands drags them down, and falls on to her knees at MEDEA'S feet]
Stay ! Stop ! I dread
The use of spells ; 'tis such a ticklish thing—
Trip on a word and though you would call sleep,
The never-ending trance obeys and done is done,
Despite belated effort, past all mending.
Prick my ear rather or black and blue my shoulder !
[MEDEA flings the suppliant aside and, raising the javelin with both arms above her head, stands stiff as she invokes :]
By that hen-dragon coiled in the abyss,
I now invoke *thee*, irresistible drowse
That fell on Argus,—Seize her, hold her numb
Both mind and body, but so that she, a witness,
May deem she dreams what cannot be expressed
Or must surpass belief.
[PROTO stands rapt in sleep.]
CURTAIN BEARER
Done, at last ! and, now,
Hast thou gained aught ?
MEDEA
I am free, alone !
CURTAIN BEARER
Therefore I voice thy thought.
MEDEA
My thought ? Who art thou ?

CURTAIN BEARER
I speak for silenced visions in thy mind :
Their wise tongues, long refused a hearing, tell thee ;
This is the second failure of thy life !
MEDEA
To be alone is vital to the mind :
As water to the body. Let me drink ;
I have not tasted solitude for weeks.
CURTAIN BEARER
I am the cistern of thy loneliness ;
Drink, peer down at thy face, dip, plunge !
Need pool invite the diver ? shade at noon
Plead with the way-farer ?
I leave my virtue free as they do theirs.
MEDEA
Am I alone, only to be self-mocked ?
CURTAIN BEARER
This is the second failure of thy life :
And threatens worse than when thou lettedst Jason
Enter that woodland temple, thy young mind.
MEDEA
Knowing I fail, why can I not unsay
The spell ? Set Proto free ? and join the chase ?
CURTAIN BEARER
Why longest thou again
For that close-mingled life of mother and child ?
MEDEA
I long, and care not why.
CURTAIN BEARER
Was not a life
In cool fast-rooted forest thy first dream ?
MEDEA
Yes.
CURTAIN BEARER
At ten years old
Slim votress of intrepid Artemis,
Didst thou not pace the pillared glades by night,
Both when the trees were still as brooded thought
And when they surged with ocean eloquence ?

MEDEA
What ailed me to throw off that consecration ?
CURTAIN BEARER
Why, gallant looks, the common lure of women !
MEDEA [with a wounded cry]
Ah ! be silent !
[She paces in agony to and fro ; then looking round]
Trees promised renewed health to my despair
When I came back heart-wrecked from Jason's house,
The mother murdered in me.
[Looking up she addresses Artemis in the moon]
Has not their blood,—
My own most precious blood,—shed by these hands
Appeased thee, thou pure Huntress of the Soul ?
[She lifts both hands and prays mutely to Artemis in the moon. THE FOLDERS remain as hitherto in their places but voice the parts of MERMEROS and PHERES.]
MERMEROS [in a low voice as though approaching to surprise]
They're both there still.
PHERES
Has mother killed that nymph ?
MERMEROS
No, no.
She chanted her to sleep ; I told her to.
PHERES
What, standing
MERMEROS
Hide.
PHERES
There is no need to hide, they cannot see us.
MERMEROS
Hide from hearing, hide in silence. Hush.
[Their whispers become inaudible.]
MEDEA [despondingly]
Alas, my heart
Is more a mother than ever it was a bride.
Temptation grips me now more savagely
Than when I followed Jason ; even while

I prayed, I heard their voices whispering
And my thought, far from soaring like a stem
On tip-toe with allegiance to its Queen,
Cowered and dared defy her strict command :
" To seek no good from others but cherish good
In the cold cradle of integrity
Clean, wholesome, self-contained."
There ! my two boys
Are all the good I seek.
[Listens.]
I must have heard
Or dreamed their voices ; let me at least know which.
If they are there, I'll win forgiveness from them
And that is what I yearn for most of all.
[Turning she addresses the trees]
Whisper, O trees, where are they now ? Did not
Their voices flit like birds among you lately ?
Or was I heart-deceived ?—
Darlings, listen
I am your mother still, though I took back
The life I gave. My love preferred you dead
Rather than wronged, unbodied rather than
Betrayed to most precarious servitude.
[Again she looks anxiously all round.]
I hear no longer your clear happy voices.
Forgive me, call again, O call again !
[Listens.]
They must have wandered off—Or are you hiding ?
[A burst of childish laughter as though it had been long suppressed. THE FOLDERS remain still but voice the parts of PHERES and MERMEROS.]
PHERES
We hid.
MERMEROS
Silence is now our hiding place.
MEDEA [searching eagerly behind the rock and all about]
Where ? Where ?
PHERES
To find us you must make us laugh.

MEDEA [distractedly leaping up]
Ah ! how can I, who cannot see you, laugh ?
[A second burst of laughter.]
MEDEA
You're really there ?
MERMEROS
We're found because we laughed.
PHERES
That's the new game.
MERMEROS
I said : " Now we must hide " but Pheres said :
" She cannot see us, there's no need to hide."
Then I said : " Hide from hearing, hide in silence,
We'll not be found there till she makes us laugh."
PHERES
That's the new hide-and-seek we play at now.
MEDEA [incredulously]
But are you really there ? You move about ?
BOTH BOYS
Yes, we are here, and run and leap and laugh.
MEDEA [kneeling on one knee and holding out her arms]
Come, I have much to whisper, heart to heart.
MERMEROS
What a beautiful bow you've got.
PHERES
Bend it, mother.
MEDEA
I want your pardon, you can only give it
When you shall know how cruel were the wrongs . . .
BOTH BOYS [interrupting]
Shoot, mother, shoot.
MERMEROS
The summer night is short,
We must go back to our graves, before it dawns.
MEDEA [still kneeling, has drawn an arrow to its head and now throws both bow and arrow down]
That's how I bend it, now reward me, cuddle,
And let me whisper ; dears, your father meant
Another woman's sons should take your places,
Be princes in your stead, and that your mother . . .

BOTH BOYS (interrupting]
Yes, yes, but shoot ; we want to see you shoot !
MERMEROS
Make it hail arrows like a storm. Hit trees.
PHERES
Yes, arrows plug in wood with a fine thud.
MEDEA
Come close, I want to fondle curly polls.
MERMEROS
Your hands have lost all touch for our hair now.
MEDEA
O cruel Mermeros, forgive poor mother.
BOTH BOYS
There's not mueh time ; don't waste it, draw and shoot !
MEDEA
Is it so bad exchange—this moonlit life
For brutal days, kind trees for angry men ?
MERMEROS
We have grand times now the moon is up ; take aim !
MEDEA [having aimed, as she lays down bow and arrow once more)
That's right, now listen. Only because her home
Lay far across the sea was mother scorned. . . .
MERMEROS
Ho ! there scuttles a rabbit, come on, Pheres.
(MEDEA looks about distractedly, trying to divine in which direction they have pursued the rabbit.]
CURTAIN BEARER [accompanied by MEDEA'S dance or pantomime]
Seeing, but not seen,
Save of the timid, dumb
Creatures who have no thought ;
They went, have turned and come.
PHERES
Mother, we're back.
MERMEROS
He burrowed before we got there.
But not from fear of us.
PHERES
No, now the forest creatures let us stroke them.

MEDEA
Stroke me.
MERMEROS
We do, but your skin does not tell you.
PHERES
A squirrel, Mermeros, be quick, hurrah !
CURTAIN BEARER [MEDEA as before]
Near but not like,
Foreign as things from Ind,
They, intangible, viewless, can
Be fondled less than wind.
MERMEROS
Though we move now as easily as the air
They often win the race.
PHERES
They love the fun.
MEDEA
Are you so fine-spun ? My insensitive earth
Aches to dissolve in air.
MERMEROS
I saw an ear
Move in that fern-cave ; let's creep in on him.
CURTAIN BEARER [MEDEA as before]
Glad voiced, they flood
With joy the deep heart-springs,
But ignorant and young,
Speak but of trivial things.
PHERES
Rabbits are glad to see us, Mother, now.
MERMEROS
We peep into their homes and watch them eat.
MEDEA
Come, come, forgive your cruel mammy, darlings ;
She hurt you so, to save you . . .
BOTH BOYS
That's over now.
MERMEROS
The wounds no longer hurt and Pheres cries
Only on dark thick-clouded nights, or when
It rains.

MEDEA

Ah ! then ?

PHERES

Then Mermeros cries

MERMEROS

Not loud,

We crawl for shelter under eaves of rock.

MEDEA

And whimper there together, poor, poor loves.

PHERES

Mermeros has been up above the trees
He is so brave, and when I am, we both
Will up and up to visit a small star.

MERMEROS

That must be on a still, fine, moonless night.

PHERES

Come, hunt us, mother, we will be your stags.

MERMEROS

Short time is left us, for I smell the dawn.
Shoot by ear, you cannot aim by sight.

(SECOND DANCE, MEDEA moving about and aiming in various directions, always relinquishing her intention before freeing the arrow while the CURTAIN BEARER says :]

Though they scamper through the dewy grass,
Not a bead they shake !
And, though they through these curtains pass
That spiders between bushes make,
No film of web they break.

PHERES

I'm in the pine tree's cleft.

MERMEROS

And I, I stand on the rock.

CURTAIN BEARER

Too bold once, even for games too timid now,
Her wavering arrow taps her shaken bow.

PHERES

Aim, mother, more to the left,
Here I stand stiff as a stock.

CURTAIN BEARER
Against such naked charm, weapons are vain,
She cowers, pierced where worse-than-arrows rain.
MERMEROS [as MEDEA recovers and makes a last effort to aim and shoot]
Your arrow now points straight at me ;
Before you move it, set it free.
CURTAIN BEARER
From behind that oak a goddess took aim,
Out from the moon her silver shaft came.
MERMEROS
Pheres, edge round for fear the Nymph be hit.
PHERES
She's a tower of sleep, I climb to her top to sit.
CURTAIN BEARER
A tower of grief, the prison of woe,
She drops her arrow, lets fall her bow.
PHERES
Why, what's the matter, mother ? won't you play ?
MEDEA
I cannot.
MERMEROS
Why, mother,
If you could kill us with the knife we felt,
Surely you can loose the arrow we shan't feel at us !
MEDEA
Only if mother looks into your eyes,
Can her tale earn the pardon that she needs.—
I must and will have visible, palpable treasures.
There is a spell of might to effect the change,—
Wait but an instant, you shall fill my arms.
[She invocates.]
O thou fire-white Nemesis,
In the heart profound,
Sister of the form that is
Beauty born to touch and sight,
With whom the waves are crowned,
I implore thy viewless might !
Transfuse thy radiant sister, her will moulding,

To grant these gracious forms Death is withholding
Their return to . . .
PHERES [in terror]
Stop, mother, stop.
MERMEROS [in terror]
Lay down your rod,
Ah ! must our wounds throb, throb and bleed anew ?
[They both shriek.]
MEDEA [reversing the arrow]
Fire-core of heart-searching Fate,
That destroyest to create,
I revoke my prayer ; be kind,
O grant it not.
[She throws herself down in despair.]
PHERES [sobbing]
You did not know those words would hurt so, did you ?
MERMEROS [sobbing]
Mother, it dawns, we must to our snug graves.
PHERES
Lay some new toys on them for us to find :
Two bows and arrows like yours, but not so heavy.
MERMEROS
Two little image bows, we play with images.
MEDEA [distractedly rising to her knees]
O darlings, can't you stay to have one game ?
BOTH BOYS [their voices fading out upon the air]
No, mother, no, no, no, no, no.
MEDEA [throwing herself down again]
Not mine, no longer mine, the pallid moon
Is more a mother to you than I am,
Cheers you, consoles you, plays with you,
And has no tedious need for your forgiveness.
PROTO [who has commenced to stir and rub her eyes, shaking off the magic drowse]
Have I slept standing ? Yet that is not so strange
As dreams I have had. My heart still aches, as hurt by
Some memory my mind would lure again,

Which slips from thought, leaving me moved, but blank.
[With a gesture of bewilderment then a low laugh]
Tantalizing ! To nearly touch remembrance,
Yea, almost feel its wings as it escapes !
Enticed thus I've seen chaffinches in snow
Wait till I neared and stooped, then fly on further,
Repeatedly conjuring hope only to mock it ;
So now I catch at darting recollections.
[Gazing round]
Sunlight has paled the moon, coloured the leaves,
And, though it have not yet probed to this ground,
Somewhere must warm bare hills. Thus too, a glow
Wells through my heart, born from this dream that's flown,
Tender, perplexing . . .
[Coming forward and seeing MEDEA]
Ah ! Poor stricken thing !
I have disliked and feared you, now I feel
Deep pity at the sight of your prostration.
If there be remedy for broken vows
I'll help you to recovery.
[She stoops down over MEDEA]
[THE CURTAIN BEARERS AND FOLDERS bring the curtain forward.]
FOLDERS [as they open it out]
The beauty of the wilderness
Has most power when
'Tis temple for a heart's distress.
Were there no men
No forest would be lone,
Nor any ocean moan,
But trees, in unbewildering number, stand
And soulless din churn an undeafened strand.
BEARER (while FOLDERS refold the CURTAIN showing that the actors have withdrawn and the rock been removed]
Death is life veiled
By the pang which destroys the senses.
Passion survives : and more daintily limbed,

Man has to ail as he ailed:
His new habiliment, though dimmed,
Yet shines, by turns, transfigured again
As immortal beauty recovers from pain.
[ALL THREE then bow and withdraw.]

# NIOBE

[A drama for three voices overheard from behind screen or curtain. A boy's is first heard then a girl's answers.]

THE BOY

Have they no heart ?
This god and this goddess ?

THE GIRL

How should I know ?
Where can we hide ?

THE BOY

Are men no more to them than rabbits to us ?

THE GIRL

Our brothers' limbs are like charred gorse stems.
Crouch, crouch, it is our turn next !

THE BOY

Their worship will starve. Who after this will bow ?

THE GIRL

Hide, do not talk !
Run, do not think !
Could we but dive through earth, worm under rock !

THE BOY

What is light unseen ?
Beauty unloved ?
Nothing, or as useless as that !

THE GIRL

What senseless raving ;
Our mother mocked theirs with insulting words ;
Who will pity us dead ?
" She is paid " they will say
" For extravagant pride
With extravagant woe ! "

THE BOY

Stop ! Let me die face to my foes ! I look up
Into the blue home of their dazzling hate.
—Let fly the flame-feathered dart ! Aim well !—Ah !

THE GIRL

Black and misshapen
He crumbles in my arms !
Fragments of coal and dust !—
Let mine fall where his fell,
Finish your work !

[A second shriek and then a pause till Niobe's voice begins]

NIOBE

I am your target next ; fumble not ; fit
Fresh arrows to your strings ! Quick ! oh quick !
I die to feel those adamant points drive through
My quivering body, pieree this heart, release
Its flux, and end my pain.
Why live I yet,
Who am the doe that calved those seven stags,
Your quarry, and those seven milk-white hinds ?
The youngest were fawns still ; dainty ! a pair !
Struck ! ealcined ! left like sites of shepherd fires
Scorched on the green hillside—like prints
Of seven strides taken by two. . . . Ah ! like this—
Like that—like anything but what they were !

Inhuman hunters, tarry no longer ; char
Me with an incandescent bolt, I want
The unmistakable pang of very death.

Is it that tears so blind mine eyes, or is
The blue sky emptied of you and those clouds
On which you knelt to aim ? Am I
Still left ? Is it possible I should live ?
Have not you struck me through twice seven times ?
Twice seven times I felt your cruelty,
A death that killed me, yet was not my death,
But visibly, horribly flashed and consumed a son,
Or left me a daughter short. Not merely dead,
Gone ! or I could have fully fed mine eyes
Upon each darling body, washed it, dressed it,
Kissed it and spoken to it—watched the pyre
Built and the slick flames climb from log to log
Then straighten in united roar and blaze
To fail above that furnace which shrinks—is filmed
With white ash slowly, till but a low heap
Is left for wind to stir. This had been much !—
Why leave to picture how the limp corpse drifted
(Like those whose sons are drowned far out at sea)

Drifted, sunk, or was cast on lonely beach
By the desisting storm—to follow thus,
Though only in conjecture, might absorb
And so relieve ! No, utter and unique
Is *my* unmitigated bereavement, *my*
Grief that has nothing but unemployable strength.

Not as they died their mother dies, though slain ;
An infinite craving for death that cannot die
Will lift her woe to unforgiving skies
Whose beauty remembers not that beauty she
Can not forget. Niobe shall not burn,
For that is quickly over—she must last.
Cold, cold and idle as a stone is grief ;
For it must watch the sun arise and set—
Must feel the intolerable loveliness
Of every day's commencement and flushed close—
Must feel the consummation of each night's
Unapproachable beauty. Phœbus will pass ;
Artemis lag behind to show herself
Almost as bright as he is when alone :
And both will know I watch them ; I shall know
How they intended that these eyes should see—
Still washed with tears, kept by huge grief alive—
What, only to me, is not a welcome sight.

Yes, they are lovely, Leto, thy twain are,
Who, hourly, daily, monthly, yearly change
And yet are ever young and ever fair :
How should unchanging memory rival them,
Though it can multiply their forms by seven ?

Mine never returned to any single age !
Nor could I ever tell which best became them
Or now or then or soon ; for human pride
Gropes and is never sure. Of all their states
Only the last, by its destruction, vies
In vividness with the large lamps of heaven ;
And tears, which make those dazzling, wear a thought
As rain blears an inscription. Love may brim

A mind ; Time sips and sips ; the rare cup soon
Lies empty as a skull. What is a child
But vanquished by the re-invigorate
Resplendent freshness of the Sun and Moon ?

# TYRFING

CHARACTERS

ANGANTYR. A VIKING SON OF ARNGRIM
TIND, RANI, HARVORD. HIS BROTHERS
TOFA. WIFE TO ANGANTYR
HERVOR. THEIR DAUGHTER
A FISHER LAD
A HERDSMAN

SCENE: Late on a summer afternoon, under an immense sky, sad flats of low dunes dominated here and there by tumuli; some are crowned with cairns of flints and have low timber lintels and doors; some are mere barrows of grass; a few have a weather-rotten oar or so planted on them. The view is northward; the sun will sink off left.
The door end of one of these collective graves stands right front facing left.
Enter left front a Fisher lad leading TOFA, a small wizened woman with forehead scarred between the eyes.

FISHER LAD [stopping abruptly and turning round to face TOFA]
Our journey's done.
TOFA
Which of these barrows holds
The bones of Angantyr?
FISHER LAD
Your promise first:
All known, you'ld likely shuffle out of it.
TOFA
What, give before I know! Without my ring,
I'ld have naught left to buy the knowledge with.
FISHER LAD
Your skin and bones have been wrung dry of trust.
TOFA
There's grease and sap in you for many a day;
So you should trust more easily than I.
FISHER LAD
Though I be young, my seamy cat-boat's old
And lets the sea in, as my hut lets rain:
The wood of both is tinder. With your ring
I'll have withal to make them last and serve.
And, if October shoals are good this year,
I mind to wive, so I'll be on my guard:
There's more ahead of me than you can look for.
TOFA
Ah, but I've suffered more, and so my need
Swollen with actual losses outweighs yours

Which is but dread to lose. I've been a queen,—
Pledged often in four hundred horns of mead!

FISHER LAD

You speak of loss, but mirth lurks in your eye.

TOFA

I speak of what my every atom feels.
This scar is old; though it look moist and raw,
'Twas dealt me by the man I'd hugged and kissed,—
Dealt with a sword not forged by mortal smith
But cursed so that the wound will never close—
And cursed with worse doom yet; my man did this,
And every hand that grips that hilt must do
Like deed of shame, and as he died here fighting
So all who wield it die defending Tyrfing—
Tyrfing, that was the name the fell blade bore
Which ruined my whole life—you've heard of Tyrfing.
'Tis woe, not age, has tanned and shrivelled me.

FISHER LAD

It will take more than words that may be lies
To change my mind.

TOFA

You might take all I have,
I'm small and feeble, easily hurt or killed:
Your fear's absurd!

FISHER LAD

That's true; show me the ring.
[She shows it, then swiftly hides it behind her.]
Old mother, your hand's yet quick as any stoat.

TOFA

That ring's good pay for ferrying to this isle
One light as dry bean-stalk.

FISHER LAD

To make an end,
I'll hazard on my strength against your tricks.
This large mound with the door, then, is the grave
Of Angantyr; there the twelve brethren sleep.
And hereabouts they fought, if fame speak true.
[She gives the ring; when he has examined it he continues:]
The sun's low down, you'd best not loiter here

For a long sorrowing over your dead man.
I'll not push off at once, but wait an hour
And take you back.

TOFA

Yes ! no ; I may be stayed !
Come back to-morrow ; I've still a ring maybe
To pay more service.

FISHER LAD

More tricks ! But look for shelter :
You'll find some herdsmen's huts lie north of west :
Hereabouts is most awesome after dark ;
Wraiths have been met, and queer unnatural flares :
I've watched them when out fishing, like a town
Twinkling where is no living body's house.

TOFA

Fear not for me : I've wit and runes to boot.

FISHER LAD

I'll hug the shore to-morrow before noon.

TOFA

It will be kind.

FISHER LAD

Don't let dark find you here.

[Exit right front]

[She seats herself on the ground with her back to the barrow and waits in silence for the lad to get well away, then, leaning back against the further of the two buttresses of turf which flank the door, speaks over her shoulder as to one within]

TOFA

Angantyr, I am Tofa.
[A silence]
Are you deaf, husband ? is your sleep so sound ?
Twenty-one years back my whisper was enough
To bring your arms around me in the dark.
Has black hate quenched remembrance of our love,
So that no sparkle from it wakes your brain ?
[A silence]
By your sword, Tyrfing, by
That gust from hell which drove you mad and left
This scar across my brow,—

By that long hair you had been used to plait
For the mere bliss it gave your giant fingers,—
By my scalp that you in rage exposed to scorn
Like stubble-acres to the months of rain,—
I conjure you to answer me this once.
[A silence ; then she rises, takes two steps right, then turns to front the door]
What ! do you stickle for more ceremony,
Keeping mum to me ? I had thought the dead,
When they've been forced to hold their peace so long,
Would readily answer those who were their own,
Though they exact strange rites from meddling witches.

Yet lengthy silence disinclines for speech ;
Even *my* tongue after quite lonely days
Has stiffened numb as though in need of chafing ;
So vacant years spent here might maim like frost-bite.
An old rune clamours out for speech, I'll try it.
What charms, they say, plain talk from tench or mould-warp
Should part her husband's lips for wife once loved.
Voice for the dumb !
Words for the tongue-tied !
Odin, wise, one-eyed,
Pierce thou the glum
Stale cold pain
Of the skull-cramped brain !
[THE VOICE OF ANGANTYR out of the grave
Tofa, is that thy voice, and not
Those never-changing accents in my brain,
That will not let me taste this barrow's peace ?]
TOFA
Yes, it is I who smile in spite of dread,
To learn you have not lain untroubled here
While I must bear the hard lot of a serf.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE as before
How, of a serf ?]
TOFA
All men said, Angantyr
Had never slashed his wife and cropped her head

Without clear proof that she deserved such shame.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE as before
Forgive me, Tofa.—Ah ! that curséd blade ;
Would I had never closed my hand on it !]
TOFA
Yes, even our child, to prove your fatherhood
Must sleep on snow, race, wrestle, fight with boys,
And never ease a hurt by audible wail,
And never cease to harden her young arms
Or toughen knees and ankles, till she, now,
Fares with her Viking-comrades out to sea.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE as before
A maid ! and comrade of the Vikings, Tofa ?]
TOFA
Equal in strength, in courage and in pride
To have proved herself your daughter with your spirit.
What it oft cost her as a child, God knows ;
She never told : but has won freedom now,
As though you never had defamed her mother.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
O wife, this is a marvel. What's her name ?]
TOFA
Hervor, and for her sake am I come here
Where she will soon be, begging hard from you
That Tyrfing. I was put about to get
Beforehand hither, so headstrong is her youth.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
Never shall she have either sword or curse.]
TOFA
She swears that she will have it, curse or no.
Hark ! that was her yodle.
[Rises and gazes round]
It is a herd,
Worries some goats together with his dog
Yonder upon the flat lip of the bay,
Whom she has seen.
[Stooping behind the barrow]
He hears and hastes this way,
Trusting his flock to keep the track to stable.
Where shall I hide ? Behind this barrow ?

[ANGANTYR'S VOICE

No,

Behind the next.]

TOFA

I fear all dead men's voices
Save yours alone ; and, look, the sun sinks fast !
I dare not go so far off, Angantyr.

[She hides behind the barrow and soon the HERD enters, coming round the front of the barrow from the left, and meets HERVOR on the left as she enters well back]

HERD

Where do you spring from, woman ?

HERVOR

I came in my long ship to Munar bay.

HERD

Back to it then ! or seek some friendly roof.

HERVOR

I know none of the island folk, and shall
Not need a bed to-night.

HERD

Not a roof either ?

HERVOR

Nor yet a roof.

HERD

This grave-yard island is
A fearsome place to be abroad by night in.

HERVOR

Good friend, which of these cairns did Arrow Odd
Raise o'er the sons of Arngrim ?

HERD

Name not the dead ! You must be half a fool
To venture on so plain a question here.

HERVOR

Fellow, for your good help here is a ring—

HERD [edging away distrustfully and speaking at her]

Not even a ring of gold keeps me from home,
Or tricks me into naming dead men, here,
While night steals in on day. Samsey's an isle

Where goats may safely bleat ! Small talk of milk
And cheese in Samsey's safe but, out of doors,
In Samsey fighters and fighting
Never must be named !

HERVOR

My talk's of little else.

HERD

Say nothing then !
[Then looking at her with a new suspicion]
Young woman, are you mortal ? I doubt it, seeing
This mail of iron and that queer cap of bronze.

HERVOR

I have slain men in battle, and expect
To die as they did.

HERD

You're no Valkyr then ?
Not daughter to Odin, eh ?

HERVOR

I ride the iron-shod steed whose hooves dint earth,
And that sail-wingéd plunger on the brine ;
But never bestrode the horse that foots the air,
Or climbed among the clouds, or raced the storm.

HERD

Only a woman ? Harnessed like a man ?

HERVOR

Only a woman.

HERD

Young too ?

HERVOR

These feet have crunched the snow of twenty winters.

HERD

You'll wait here after dark ?

HERVOR

So I intend.

HERD

I bode ill, and deem we part forever now.
Sun dips, I dare not longer . . .

HERVOR [seizing him]

Stay, my valiant,
Point me out first the grave for which I asked !

[The HERD, arrested in his flight, points to the tomb on the right]
Thanks ; take that, and home to your hovel headlong.
[She releases him and gives him a ring. The HERD runs out left front]
HERVOR [to herself gazing upward]
This silver, pointed dusk heralds a wolf-eyed night.
[Glancing round]
The wind that combs this grass tugs like old fear ;
And all these barrows hold ill-buried men
Who cannot rest so far from the home-mound
They hoped to lie in. Though I know battle-runes
That plague an enemy or spoil his sleep,
I am ill-taught to rouse this grave-yard gentry—
Might better have brought a wizard,—and some food
To tempt their long fast from its sullenness.
'Twere rash to strike that lintel with this spear :
And yet I'll do it.
[She strikes the lintel with the butt of her spear, causing a dull thud to resound, at which she retreats hastily across left, but soon commences to return]
I have carved death out of a living man ;
Shall I now fear, like dwarfish Lapland warlock,
An idol that's the pair to one I've made ?
[She approaches the barrow and stands before its door]
Wake, Angantyr ! I, Hervor, bid thee wake !
Thy daughter, Tofa's true-born, conjures thee
To hand her out that sword that Swafurlami
Stole from the dwarfs ! Am I not thy sole heir ?
[Silence]
Surely my life has answered thy heart's wish
As well as that longed-for son's could ever have done ?
Hast thou no pride that Vikings call me comrade ?
[Silence]
Ha ! am I nothing to you ? You are dead
And care not whom your fame moulds. Though I be
Child of your spirit, creature of your loins,
I am not anything to you, perhaps ?
[Silence]
Then I will rouse your brethren and plague their sleep

Until they bid you speak.
[Taking a step back and raising her voice]
O Harvord, Hiorvord, Rani, Reifnir, Tind,
Heave up that blanket of thick-rooted grass !
Crawl forth, stand up, rouse you to answer me !
[Silence]
O Harvord, Hiorvord, Rani, Reifnir, Tind,
I'll cast a spell shall plague you with the itch ;
May your rib-cages swarm as doth an anthill
If you refuse me now the boon I crave :
It ill becomes you ghosts to grudge the world
Those costly weapons that you cannot use.
[A VOICE OUT OF THE DARKNESS
Damp stinking blindness ; this is hell.
A SECOND VOICE
What, am I caged in putrid bones ?
A THIRD
A clinging, rooty, mouldy smell
Is in my nose and I hear groans.
FIRST VOICE
Who's there ?]
SECOND VOICE [as a figure becomes visible above the barrow]
Tind. Who asked ?
FIRST VOICE
Rani.
[A second figure appears two paces behind the first, both are muffled in old cloaks over rusty armour. They sway sleepily as though limbs and eyes yielded them but half-service]
THE THIRD VOICE issuing again from the grave [visibly surprises them
I, Harvord, through dense darkness raced and rushed
Dwindling the while as fast, find myself here
Small as nit, a needle's point this grave
Vaults hugely over, like the midnight cave.
Yet late I filled a multitude with cheer
Singing in a torched hall thronged round with flushed
Faces . . .]

TIND [interrupting]
Out from that stivy charnel, brother,
Brave the night air.
I, too came posting backward through the night
From those great gala plains of light
Where we with deathless valour laugh and fight.
RANI [as though to himself while a third form rises between them]
A human voice intruded
And, straight for me,
The sworded tumult faded like a dream
As when dims, curdles, thickens
Mist over pale calm sea,
Till what has been a fleet shall seem
To each of forty sail one lonely hulk
Haunted by booming horns.
Beclouded thus I hear
Sounds that seem neither far nor near,
Neither who speaks nor what is said being clear.
HERVOR [to the three phantoms who still stagger vaguely]
I called ye mighty spirits, I, a maid
Who, yet, in battle, have sent men to hell.
I called ye, with the whole strength of a heart
That braves death willingly, needlessly, and I
Am glad I called,
Proud as the lark is
That bids the sun turn out
When up he rolls.
RANI [brushing his face with a drowsy arm]
How lustily she crows !
I hear but see not.
TIND [peering towards her]
Brother, I glimpse her
Tall as trim Valkyr
And yet her smile and her eyes
Are doubtful and blurred.
HARVORD [advancing past the others as she retreats]
What wouldst thou, hawk-girl,
Hen-eagle rather ?

Time here is torture ; we long to
Vacate these musty trappings
And this damp dim-lighted field of graves.
HERVOR [coming to a stand left]
Angantyr, your brother,
Sired me, yet gat him no son ;
So owes me Tyrfing :
Yet skulks he and keeps mum
Hoarding the bright blade
He never uses
Yet grudges that I should.
TIND [laughing]
Who wants a heavy stick
Hammered flat out of iron
When he wields vision-bright
Sword keen as his fancy.
RANI
Who cares to mangle
Clammy blood-spurting flesh
When he may cleave cleanly
Stuff healed the same instant,
And kills not his peer
But wins from him praise
For the blow that he dealt him.
HERVOR
'Tis idle fighting when no man is hurt.
HARVORD
As the flame leapeth
Up from a dull log,
So over hacked carcase
The spirit danceth :
So from old battlefield
Tip-toes a bright conflict
More nimble in beauty,
Flame-like and clear.
HERVOR
Watching their gold locks
Combed up from the logs
I too have envied
The intense activity

The up-rushing joy
Of Loki's energetic
And beautiful children.

TIND

For this prize men hold cheap
Life in the body,
Wealth, and the ingle
They loved to call theirs—
To dance with this glory.

RANI

Splendid this hope was—
That act from approval
Need never be severed
In heart that dared suffer
Any anguish of wounds
Rather than bow to
The blundering sequence
Of events that bully
All earthbound intentions.

HERVOR

Ye did well, and I hope to ;
But my sire, Angantyr,
Though I am a Viking and brave as himself,
Hoards the iron hard-tempered
That kills all whom it woundeth
Though now he own weapon
That heals what it rippeth
And maketh of fighting
An unmingled glee.

HARVORD

He spends small time fighting ;
He doubted his wife,
So doubts he begat thee :
His silence is sickness,
No ail of the body,
A canker of thought.

HERVOR

Tell him to answer
Or steal the sword from him.

TIND
Why should he answer
Who never comes striding,
Axe whirled over-head,
Across the battlefield?
RANI
His wild bursts of laugh and song
Trolled after feasting
Ne'er shake Valhalla;
His stool still stands there,
No hero astride it.
HERVOR
Where is he then?
TIND
Nay, he is here, child,
Betodded with scruples;
Like ivy-bound tree
His body pretends life
And prisons his spirit.
HERVOR
Steal the sword from him.
RANI
That were not easy.
TIND
Come let us rouse him.
ALL THREE PHANTOMS
Dost thou hear,
Angantyr,
Answer thy daughter;
Whate'er thou hast thought her,
She crows with thy spirit.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE as before
What ails thee, maiden, tricked out like a man?
Art thou brain-wildered or mad-hearted, child,
To waken dead men.]
TIND
Nay, brother, ail is
What thou thyself dost; this girl of thine
Speaks and looks hearty.

[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
Be off to your play-ground
Ye brawling braggers of silly bloodless dreams.]
TIND
Then deal with this chick of your hatching as father should.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
I rather will talk her fair than still be maddened
By your shouts and boasts.]
RANI
Swear thou wilt answer
All her heart asks thee.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
I swear it by Tyrfing.]
ALL THREE PHANTOMS
Back to the wide plains
Brighter than noonday,
Back to self-acting thought
Not mocked, misdelivered
By blundering thews,
Back to life aptly played
And fair as a boy's hope!
[Having turned they fade and drift out of sight.]
HERVOR
Farewell to ye uncles!
Thanks for your help.—
And now we are private
Let us know one another,
Thou sire of Hervor.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
Speak on, I hear.]
HERVOR
So we can talk, great fighter and strong man
No other mortal has lived in my mind
So much as thou, and, now I hear thy voice,
It gratifies like after-battle praise.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
No other mortal ever roamed at night
About these mounds. To front thus our abode

Harsh-mouthed with curses, with brandisht spear, with shield,
Helmet and mail-coat is not like a mortal.]
HERVOR
I've always passed for mortal till this day,
And all my body feels that it can die.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
Samsey, alas ! lies lonely on the brine ;
I neither see nor hear like men, who die
At home or who, brought back from battle, lie
In the home mound and watch o'er those they leave,
And help them in their need with pregnant dream,
Or word sighed underground. How can I know
But what thou art some changeling—a dwarf's child
Suckled with milk that should have fed my son ?]
HERVOR
See here this shank and shin. Brat got by dwarf
Ne'er grew such length of bone : few men have longer.
[ANGANTYR'S VOICE
Perchance, on stormy night, thy mother sleeping,
Some Asa-woman stooped above the cradle
And left her daughter in the place of mine ;
These goddesses have no time to rear girls.]
HERVOR
Though I first crowed in Asgard, still I've borne
Thy daughter's name and have forced faith from all
That none save Angantyr could get a girl
So like a boy.
Ho ! ho ! I think I spy thee lying there,
Like a felled oak-trunk green with glimmering moss.
[As twilight deepens into night ANGANTYR'S form begins to appear through the mound as though the darkness rendered its turfs transparent]
ANGANTYR
Sinks not thy heart to look upon the dead ?
HERVOR
Nay, but leaps up to see thee, though as dimly
As in some black tarn a drowned man by starlight !
I just make out that giant limb, thy sword-arm.
Come, reach me up from there my heritage,

Tyrfing, the famous blade which Dwale forged
And Swafurlami stole and that arm fought with.
ANGANTYR [who can now be seen lying within the mound, head towards the door, like an effigy carved in beryl]
Neither father, son nor kinsman buried me,
But foeman dug this grave and raised this cairn :
And doubtless Arrow Odd took Tyrfing home.
HERVOR
A lie ! He feared the curse, and must have died,
For Tyrfing's sake, not kindly in his bed ;
Reproached for some sad deed, not praised by all,
Had Tyrfing once been his. Such lies won't serve :
Tell me naught but the truth ! Why art thou loth
To deal thine only child her heritage ?
ANGANTYR
Thy heritage ! Is all I leave this curse
That binds my heir to do some shameful deed ?
Mad girl ! know, if the fear of doing wrong
Leaves thee undaunted, there are other terrors.
HERVOR
I know I must do things that I shall rue.
What man who seeks his ecstasy in battle
Can ponder every bloody hour unshamed ?
Even you twelve death-dealing sons of Arngrim
When you'd hewn down the whole of Hialmar's shipmates
On yonder beach, fought on with stock and stone :
So when you saw himself and Arrow Odd
Returning from inland,
Wellnigh exhausted by that wretched waste
Of battle frenzy, you
Must counter their fresh onset, and, though twelve
'Gainst only two, in spite of Tyrfing, fall.
ANGANTYR
The shame of those blows dealt on bloodless stuff
Is not what cankers recollection now ;
The curse had worked before I landed here.
HERVOR
Though some one deed bring shame, it is by tens

I'll count the deeds that shall splice fame to fame—
Making one saga of my life and thine !
ANGANTYR
Do what thou canst, but with a cleaner sword.
HERVOR
The deadliest is the cleanest ; sure to kill,
It leaves no scare-crow halt and maimed to dog you.
ANGANTYR
It failed to kill thy mother whom it wounded :
Her livid forehead still reproaches me.
HERVOR
Is it then true ? that thou scratchedst her brow
With Tyrfing, though she had not played thee false ?
ANGANTYR
Hast thou dared doubt her ?
HERVOR
The thing was hard to credit.
And then she smiled avouching it, as though
Her words were all at variance with her knowledge.
I want Tyrfing not to scratch women with
But to kill men.
ANGANTYR
Women mould men : must seem
Wry-natured then, destroying woman's work.
HERVOR
Men kill what man begot, burn house and gear,
Shaped by their painful toil, more slowly far ;
All life warps thus ;
Sex makes no odds :
The she-bear's hug is fatal as the male's ;
And wolf's fang is no savager than she-wolf's ;
A boy is born defenceless as a girl,
Yet, armed, soon kings it over every brute ;
Likeness to man obtains esteem for woman.
What does life offer better than a sword ?
Shall milk and teeming nannies be my care ?
Or, keen for trade, must I lie about felts
And furs and cloths to some reluctant buyer,
Then anguish while the hearty Vikings singing
Carry my wealth down to their full-gorged ship ?

In wassail shall I drown thought how I live
Only for food and drink—to be alive
To-morrow bigger-bellied than to-day ?
Is one of these the life you'd choose for me ?
ANGANTYR [as he speaks unearthly flames burst through the mound's door and marish fires wake up the distant dunes with blue and violet lights]
Thou art indeed web of my flesh and spirit,
All of one piece with my few years of manhood.
But look around, betray thy hidden woman ;
Hell's gates now swing ajar ; the graves gape wide ;
The island is ablaze and snorts and groans !
In fire like this lay Tyrfing, glowing white,
Ere Dwale plunged it hissing into snow :
Back to thy ship ! Haste, girl, while yet there's time !
HERVOR
Dead men can light grim fire, but 'tis the sun
My eyes blench from, not this. Thy daughter's knees
Should make shift not to quail, though ghost at this door
Stretched limp hand forth to touch her. Reach the blade
That the dwarves smithied here ; nothing is gained
Hiding it ; flame and noise and smoke are bootless.
ANGANTYR
The slayer of Hialmar lies beneath my shoulders,
Hilt and blade wrapped in fire. No maid on earth
Dare put her hand to it.
HERVOR
I'm game to grasp
That hot hilt, risking a scorched palm ; and quickly
Could cool it in this grass, then stroke the blade
To let it know I love good workmanship.
Look, when I wave my spear these elf flames limp
And droop and start aside ; the draught my shield fans
Chases them right and left. I'll peep inside
And see if I can reach to Tyrfing's cradle.
ANGANTYR [agitated and feeling for the sword which he at length draws out of his mattress, filling the interior of the mound with a white flash from its shining blade]
Though brave, thou wert a fool to push wide-eyed

Into these fires ; stand back ! I rather give
Thee sword and curse than see thee self-destroyed.
Pull a good hand-full of the dewiest bents
Lest it should scorch thy flesh.
[HERVOR comes forward and lays down her spear and gathers and wraps the long grass about her hand. TOFA is seen doing the same behind, and when the sword is thrust out through the flames runs forward and seizes it before her daughter can. Immediately the flames vanish, but now the moon is sufficiently risen off left to prevent a return of the darkness that preceded the illumination of the wild-fires, and her light continues to strengthen as the scene proceeds.]
TOFA
Not so quick, Hervor ; you have always doubted
How I came by this scar.—Tell, Angantyr,
Tell how it all took place : that tale will be
A better heritage than this bad steel
Whose bite is crueller than a rabid dog's.
HERVOR
Mother, how came you here ?
TOFA
To save my child
I'ld traverse rougher friths, in crazier craft.
Now hearken what your father has to say.
ANGANTYR [his figure dims and glowers and threatens to disappear]
'Tis shame enough to know what I have done ;
Recounting it to young and ignorant ears
Would sting so as to fever my thought forever.
TOFA
Courage to do ; none to avouch what's done.
[ANGANTYR groans.]
TOFA [reprehending herself]
Hey day ! how bitter tongued are all wronged folk :
They relish seeming excused for giving pain.
I do intend not to reproach you, husband ;
For often still my smile recalls our joy—
Those hugging nights and days that dreamlike fled.

HERVOR
He has admitted you were true to him.
TOFA
Listen, you grew so proud as you grew tall
I lacked the heart to grapple with your doubts ;
I'd lost the rank that you were winning back
With the whole tension of your wrestling youth ;
And, faced by all men's scorn in you, I dared not
Flourish a truth no tongue save mine could vouch for ;
But dumbly smiled, being mocked by what I knew.
HERVOR
You were hard placed yet . . .
TOFA
Yet not,—but listen!
'Twas near Upsala ; when the ships were moored,
My husband's brothers sent to bid its king
Weigh his fair daughter 'gainst his town. Meanwhile
They diced and wrangled who'ld have Ingaborg
When once her father should consent to yield
Her famous beauty to their threats of pillage.
ANGANTYR
Hearing is torture, so prolong it not.
TOFA
Patience ; truth lives in the whole, not in a half.
—Listening in dreamy bliss, suddenly I
Start, for my Angantyr swears by Tyrfing
Ingaborg shall be his ; and I, a fool,
Leap up and rate him with a vixen's tongue.
HERVOR
It asked a beating, done before his comrades.
TOFA
He seized my wrists and dragged me to our ship,
And down the covered hold. There threw me, kneeled,
And stretched my hair across the oaken bench,
Sawing with Tyrfing through it to the wood,
Rolling its heavy thickness to and fro,
Till all was severed jaggedly, as near
My neck's scruff as could be. Then, while I
Lay sobbing, bruised and broken by his strength,
He with the blade's tip lifts my face and grins.

ANGANTYR [his excitement causing him to glow more brightly]
I see blood zig-zag over thy wet features.
TOFA
Old friend, I'll set things right before I end.
HERVOR
I marvel you can speak so now to him :
Having so suffered, my resentment would
Have grown with years, yet you call him ' old friend.'
TOFA
My memory's treasures consoled me for that wrong.
The drudge who once was queen wore her mind's best
As offset to her actual garb's disgrace.
Well, on the day my doom fell, I lay there
While he derisively gibed me, ' Thus teach I
Thee that thou art my thing, my bed, my dainty,
And, no leave asked, I'm free to toss thee away,
And lie on new bed, taste fresh honey-cakes.'
ANGANTYR [dimming again slightly]
Man's body hungers after various women,
Even though his heart content itself with one.
TOFA
I'm coming soon to your excuse ; don't spoil it.
—Hialmar, Upsala's friend, had been betrothed
To Ingaborg, and while I lay there sobbing,
Sudden and loud, a horn announced his challenge :
His comrade, Arrow Odd, himself, their men
To meet the sons of Arngrim and their ships' crews
On Samsey. 'Twas agreed, and in ten days
I, big with child, a widow, stood, disfigured
And shorn, before the King and Arrow Odd,
The sole survivor from that bloody fight.
I stammered, hot with shame, and both laughed ' " Wife
Of Angantyr ? " if he did this to thee
It was because he could not call thee wife
A second longer, having proved thee false.'
ANGANTYR
Nothing can lift this load of shame off me.
TOFA
Nay, now I'll speak what must be said for thee :

—That they spoke but as every man then spake
Of Angantyr. It was not like himself!
No, this cursed blade, whenever poised or swung,
Sent through his arm a flush of nettling warmth
That drove his senses from his handsome head.
HERVOR
Every edged weapon has a fevering charm,
Though those who daily feel, resist it best;
Dalliance with you, 'tis likely, had withheld him
Too long from fence and combat.
TOFA
Girl, this sword's lure
Always has proved irresistible.
He acted under it as his image might,
Stalking a nightmare. I was sure 'twas so;
And freed my dead man from all taint of blame,
When first you laughed; you laughed at two months old.
[ANGANTYR groans]
—Poor man, you never heard our baby crow.
—And now, my daughter, do you want this curse
That must contrive your death as it did his,
Loading you first with some such deed of shame,
As far from all your proper actions as
That fury was unlike him?
HERVOR
Mother, mother,
To see you there holding that iron, sure
That you can mould the growth of twenty years!—
Do now what should have been begun when I
Lay on your lap, or stood beside your knee!
TOFA
What do you mean, girl? Answer what I asked.
HERVOR
The curse is in my blood. That sword may be
A tempting skewer to spit man like a snipe on;
The inlay metals are exquisitely patterned;
But the whole drive, that makes it deadly, tingles
Here in my fingers, throbbing from heart and brain
Before I touch it. Who that has killed man,

Would seek excuse from an old-muttered curse ?
I live for bloodshed, trained, tempered, ready.
That deed of mine which brings on me remorse
Shall find a kindlier judgment done by Tyrfing
Than with a nameless blade—not be more certain.
Give him to me !

TOFA

May my hand wither first.

HERVOR

O mother, you waste time ; I long to wield
That shaft of light you hold so awkwardly,
As though it were a shovel or a broom.

ANGANTYR [starting half up and leaning on his hands to watch them]

Hear, then, thy father, maid. Thou art a woman,
And thou shalt bear a son whom men will call
Heidreck, and he shall be the mightiest man
Then walking 'neath the blue tent of the sun.
Wilt thou load him in death as I am laden—
With never-fagged remorse that turns, year in
Year out, one millstone thought upon another ?
Leave Tyrfing here and Heidreck ne'er shall own it.

HERVOR

My son must be a warrior Viking-bred ;
He will as I fight ; why then should I fret
Foreboding him bad quarrels ere he's gotten ?

TOFA

You talk ; your son has cost you nothing yet !
When you lie faint from labour and they hold up
The small plump kernel you were broken for,
You'll feel him precious then and wish that now
You had not been so ignorantly stubborn.

HERVOR

No man in pain is ever quite himself ;
But thought grows sounder when he can leap up.

TOFA

A fine sound thought, it does one good to think it !
The mother ponders on her boy as cursed
To dip his gleeful bravery in bloodguilt ;
She watches him, as I watched you, all tense

Eager and flushed to master manliness ;
And does not yearn to separate man's valour
From man's case-hardened ease in doing wrong
And teach him to be brave some faultless way !

HERVOR

What woman can be sure her son will never
Do deeds as wry as those his grandsire did ?
But though her father's wealth had all been lost,
Though she herself ne'er shared in foray's booty,
Grant her but owner of sword forged, embellished
By the most famous dwarf smith of them all,—
With such a dowry she shall choose her son
The bravest tall begetter in the world.

ANGANTYR

Will not that husband claim both sword and curse ?

TOFA

Ha ! I foresee you'll fight with him for it.

HERVOR

Must life be spent preventing the foreboded
It would not be that which I feel it is
Free and creative in the face of doom—
Surprising the old, the dead, the dwarves, the gods
With young luck that escapes by an hair's breadth
From the still-growing threat of foregone horror.

ANGANTYR [you feel he would kneel up did the mound leave him room]

O, wild, blind-hearted, feather-headed child !

HERVOR

Was not Tyrfing blessed too as well as cursed ?
The wound it deals shall never heal, and he
Who wields it must die fighting to retain it—
The Viking-prayed-for end that wins Valhalla !—
I think my son, if he were twenty now,
And stood where I do, would not hesitate,
But take it as I take it now for him.

ANGANTYR [in great excitement]

Tofa, give me the sword.

TOFA

Here it is, husband.

HERVOR [runs between her mother and the mound's door and attempts to catch her hands]
TOFA
No, Hervor, not so fast, the sword is mine ;
The curse is on me ; I must fight for it.
[TOFA in her turn makes a feint to attack HERVOR, who closes with her and wrenches the sword from her—but TOFA still clings with both hands to her wrist and, closing her elbow down, pinches the sword against her side ; then, lunging forward, falls and bears its point against the ground. HERVOR must stagger to retain hold on the hilt, and topples over her mother, burying the sword beneath their combined weights.]
ANGANTYR [during the struggle has cried out]
Oh for a draught of blood ; a wolf's, a dog's,
A sheep's heart full ! Then could I forth and part
These women, recapture the envenomed sword !
Instead
My strength exhausts itself with feeling helpless.
I weaken, weaken, ebbing out to blankness.
[He has fallen back and settled into his original position and melted into the darkness when HERVOR kneeling up and lifting TOFA carefully off the sword, as she draws it from under her cries :]
Blood ! you bleed fast !
Mother, your deed ! not mine ! Own that it is.
TOFA [speaking in pain]
At least, Tyrfing has done the worst he can do
Held in your hand.
HERVOR
Were but that dwarf here now
I'ld sheathe the whole curse in his shapeless body.
TOFA
He's nothing, help me ! ah ! I'm glad this pain
Will save you from worse trouble !
HERVOR
Mother, mother,
I did not help you do it.
TOFA [in dire pain]
I grasped the hilt

So had to die. Lay me by Angantyr
And say I saved you.
HERVOR
What will relieve this anguish
[She watches her mother helplessly]
Why, there your smile comes back ! I do believe,
You have more joy to die than I to live.
TOFA
Be happy, child. Ah !
HERVOR [after watching her in silence]
Again your eyes laugh !
I never thought to envy any woman,
Since none was half so much a man as I :
But now I envy *you* I envied least.
TOFA
O, let me hear you own that I have saved you !
HERVOR
" Saved me,"—no ! made me feel as if his hand,
That deformed god's, that black dwarf's hand had forged me,
Plunged me twenty times in winter, brandished
Me o'er his head, then struck at you with me.
TOFA
Lay down that sword ! Squeeze my hand ! Tighter, tighter !
HERVOR
I never dreamt the curse could cause such pain.
TOFA
It cost perhaps as much to bring you forth ;
But I was young then.
HERVOR
Mother !
TOFA
Live happy.
HERVOR
I could wish nevermore to be light-hearted.
TOFA
Grip my hand hard ! You cannot give me half
The pain I need to help me bear this, ah !

HERVOR
Is it so awful ?
TOFA
Oh, it's worse than all !
[Dies]
HERVOR
There, thank the Norns she's dead ! Oh ! Call that back !
The word was out before I knew its meaning !
[A pause of horror]
Part of my life has slipped away with hers.
—You saved me. Can't you hear me say, you saved me ?
—If only she could move again or speak !
ANGANTYR (becoming visible once more]
Her hand is in my hand.
HERVOR
She's dead then ? dead !
All I can do now is to lay her out
With that respect I never showed her living.
[She lays her shield down beside Tyrfing in order to compose the body with its head in the doorway of the barrow, then rises from her knees.]
They lie there, side by side, Tyrfing and this
That Tyrfing carved out of a happy bride,
This little wizened mother.
Though she had acted foully as men said,
I, at least, might have staked much on her truth.
Why did I not, but doubted ? Was it only
Because her eyes so twinkled ?
[Stooping to raise the sword]
Tyrfing's mine :
I thought to hold him would as much uplift me
As to have conquered Norway. Far from that,
I'm quite down-hearted !
[TOFA'S VOICE out of the grave
There ! I shall escape soon !]
HERVOR
Was that her voice ?
[Stooping over her] She feels and looks quite dead.

[TOFA'S VOICE as before·
Though pain imposes still, 'tis but as gasps
And tremors shake a scared child in the arms
To which its panic fled.]
HERVOR
Her lips have not stirred !
Her spirit speaks then—Mother !
[TOFA'S VOICE out of the grave
Slowly, sight clears,
Back over the bodily tumult that was life.
I view it as you, from some warm homestead's door,
A mile inland, might scan a stormy sea.
My splendid child, the living look ahead,
Leave all that's past to us and free thy mind !]
HERVOR
I look ahead to see myself or wife
Or mother of him to whom I'ld give this sword.
How can I give it, who am cursed to die
Fighting the doomed man who must own it next ?
I'll bury it with thee, and leave it here.
[Lays down the sword beside the body once more]
ANGANTYR [shining more strongly]
Take the sword up, own and enjoy it long.
Thou wouldst return for it, ere the week's out,
If left here ; won in fight, 'tis thine, thy doom.
HERVOR
I dread possession of it ; let it lie !
[TOFA'S VOICE
Take up the sword. I bid you, for I hope
The wickedest torture it was charged with spent !
Die fighting for it ; that is the way to save
Thy son and husband ; let them win it, only
By slaying him who slew thee !]
HERVOR
Bidden by thee,
Forgiven by thee, mother, stooping I touch it.
[Lifting the sword]
It seemed as though I did desert myself,
Laying it down ; and, now I poise it, hope
Leaps in me like mad sturgeon in a net.

[She starts and then slowly looking at the sword]
A brilliant body meshed in this strong curse,
As vainly struggling as fish baffled by net !
My youth may look like that to the Norns' gaze !
ANGANTYR
Courage, my daughter, would I'd power to give thee
That store of mettle, lavishly spilt when, here,
Twelve on one day, the sons of Arngrim fell.
[TOFA'S VOICE
Farewell, my child, I'ld give you if I could
Long quiet years in which to rear your son ;
But Tyrfing mocks me ; so, choose your foes well.]
HERVOR
' Choose my foes well ' ? For husband or son may lie
Dead, mother, as thou dost, and I in doubt
Whether I killed them, or certain it was I,
May even then dare live as now to face
Another day, after this awful night.
[TOFA'S VOICE
Give all and always, my body taught me that
For breast and womb are made to exhaust themselves.]
HERVOR
You scorned to be less generous than mere flesh ;
But, a first time, pride fails me and I feel
My young blood cruel as a conqueror
Whipping me forward to the dark event
Of my despair.
[TOFA'S VOICE
Or thy deliverance.]
HERVOR [catching fire]
I'm glad that thy blood helped my father's build me.
ANGANTYR [dimming]
Fetch aid to bury her. Peace is not peace
So long as I most dread those picks and spades,
And that inroad of noise and glare, when they
Shall lay her body where her spirit lies.
HERVOR [stooping, lays down the sword and takes up her spear to which she knots two corners of her cloak ; then approaching the mound says :]
I will come back with men to ope this mound

And lay her light bones next
Thy cruelly loved bones.
[She plants the spear in the mound above the door then standing back says :]
This flag shall guide me.
[The light dies out of ANGANTYR.]
HERVOR [comes forward, resumes her shield and sword, then gazes out left]
There greys the utmost east ; though my feet burn
To meet the sun, I must show him my back
And endure to be outstripped and caught like a thief.
[Resting the flat of TYRFING on her shoulder she goes out left, striding fast]

CURTAIN

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